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February 10, 2013

Dear Consortium Prize Award Committee,

One of the History Department's majors, Aaron Nickols, has asked me to write a letter of support for the Consortium Prize Award. I enthusiastically support him and think that he is an ideal candidate for this award based on the superior paper he produced for my Fall 2012 *HIST A477: Senior Seminar*, a research based course that requires students to extensively use primary sources and utilize the Consortium Library to its fullest extent. Aaron's finished research project, entitled "The Provisional Government and 1917: The Legitimacy Paradox" is a beautifully researched and written exploration concerning the complicated story of the failure of the Provisional Government and its subsequent overthrow.

Aaron literally used the library "on the ground level" and is one of the few students who actually used *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* as a source (Kevin Keating and I have encouraged my seminar students repeatedly to use this source and it is a pleasant surprise when someone does!). Aaron used paper sources and electronic sources available at the library but he also used the Interlibrary Loan services extensively. Not only did his research paper benefit greatly from using the Interlibrary Services, but he shared his findings with the class. Several of the seminar students wanted to use the collection of documents, *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents* and it became clear that this three volume collection would be an invaluable addition to the Consortium Library. Aaron, showing his typical initiative, sent a request that this work be procured by the Consortium Library and I sent the request to the History Department's liaison (Kevin Keating) and now our library has its own copy. I love the synergy that can happen in a senior seminar when the librarians and the library and the student connect. His seminar paper shows why a good library is important. Aaron showed us, through his research and his paper, that the two most valuable resources in a library remain books on the shelf and librarians who help find new and unavailable sources.

Aaron's paper and his oral presentation of his research were peerless. He received an A+ in the course (a great rarity). I encouraged him to submit his paper to the UAA Student Showcase and I am sure that it will be appreciated by a wider audience. I am not alone in my very high assessment of Aaron's work, it is shared by my colleagues. Aaron is one of those wonderful students—a student who teaches the teacher to look at questions, sources, and events in new and different ways. Aaron's work for my Fall 2012 *HIST A477: Senior Seminar* is a perfect illustration of how research should be done (but usually isn't). He went to the library, used the search engines and bibliographies, found great primary documents on the library shelves and beyond, and brought all of his research together in a masterful paper. He clearly produced "an exemplary undergraduate research project which demonstrates evidence of significant scholarly

investigation and utilization of library resources." It also is noteworthy to point out that Aaron is not only an outstanding scholar but an exceptionally gracious, modest, and nice individual. Aaron embodies the best of UAA, and his academic excellence, which has culminated in his *HIST A477: Senior Seminar* research project, should be recognized. Thank you for this opportunity to nominate Aaron; if you have any questions or need any additional information, please contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Elizabeth J. Dennison".

Elizabeth J. Dennison
Professor of History and Chair of UAA History Department

The Provisional Government and 1917: The Legitimacy Paradox

The Provisional Government and 1917:

The Legitimacy Paradox

Aaron Nickols

University of Alaska Anchorage

Professor E. Dennison

The significance of the Russian revolution has been a bitter ongoing argument for historians and political scientists alike. Couched within that debate is the significance and meaning of 1917. For some, the significance of 1917 is based around the rise of the Bolsheviks to power and the centrality of class struggle. For others, it is a critical moment of hard political power wielded by Lenin and the Bolsheviks.¹ But, behind that debate, lays the meaning of 1917 and the Provisional Government. In the simplest of terms, there was a crisis of legitimacy. To understand the meaning of 1917 it must be recognized that, while the Russian Provisional Government was perceived as a legitimate government externally, internally it was considered almost wholly illegitimate. The events of 1917, and thus the events of the revolution and civil war that followed, hinged upon the legitimacy and sovereignty of the Provisional Government. Thus the Provisional Government represents a critical factor; the understanding of 1917. One must recognize that the Provisional Government failed to survive, at least in part, because its leaders assumed its legitimacy, while the Russian population increasingly rejected it. The leadership utterly failed to obtain a sovereign and legitimate mandate, either through legislation, by the popular consent of the Russian people, or by investiture of authority through institutional succession. The purpose of this paper is to illuminate some of the points which caused the Provisional Government to fail. In particular there appear three critical reasons for this failure; the internal politics of the Provisional Government, its relation to the Army, and its relation to the Russian population.

¹ For a more complete discussion of the historiographical debates regarding the Russian Revolution see the following: Michael Confino, "The New Russian Historiography and the Old - Some Considerations," *History & Memory* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2009), Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 3rd ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), as well as Boris Kolonitskii, "Russian Historiography of the 1917 Revolution: New Challenges to Old Paradigms?," *History & Memory* 21, no. 2 (Fall 2009), Stephen Kotkin, "1991 and the Russian Revolution: Sources, Conceptual Categories, Analytical Frameworks," *Journal of Modern History* 70, no. 2 (June 1998), C. Merridale, "Redesigning History in Contemporary Russia," *Journal of Contemporary History* 38, no. 1 (2003): 13-28., Ronald Grigor Suny, "Revision and Retreat in the Historiography of 1917: Social History and Its Critics," *The Russian Review* 53 (April 1994), and Ronald Grigor Suny, "Toward a Social History of the October Revolution," *American Historical Review* 88 (February 1983).

No historical paper is truly complete without at least a brief explanation regarding some of the sources used in its creation. Though a wide range and type of both primary and secondary sources represent the research which has gone into this paper, there are several which are of particular note. Specifically, examining the Provisional Government and its fall, there are two members of the Provisional Government who produced prolific works which have provided invaluable primary material. Alexander F. Kerensky and Paul N. Miliukov both wrote extensively about the Provisional Government, and their respective roles in it. Many of the primary sources in this paper have been drawn from their works. Of these primary sources, Kerensky and Browder's three volumes *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents* has been indispensable. Any thorough investigation of the Russian Provisional Government would be incomplete without incorporating the documents in these volumes.² Further, Paul N. Miliukov's works, specifically his *Political Memoirs* and *Russia and Its Crisis* provided valuable contextual perspective of the events of the Revolution, but also the internal workings of the Provisional Government.³ Miliukov's perspective is valuable, not only because he served as Minister of Foreign Affairs and was a powerful member of the Kadet party, but also because of his training as an historian. Miliukov was remarkably clear about his experiences, and his professional historical training makes his observations that much more valuable. Combined, these sources represent a wealth of material which is readily accessible.

For these reasons, Kerensky and Browder's works, as well as Miliukov's, largely form the basis of much of this paper, as evidenced by their liberal citation within. It is also relevant to point out that during their activities in the Provisional Government, Kerensky and Miliukov were

² Robert Paul Browder and Aleksandr Fyodorovich Kerensky, eds., *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents*, Hoover Institution Publications (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1961).

³ Paul Nikolaevich Miliukov, *Political Memoirs* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967)

in large part adversarial, and their perspectives differ strongly and offer significant contrast about the internal politics of the Provisional Government. This topic in particular will be covered in more detail later in the paper. For example, Miliukov and Kerensky both recall in their memoirs that one of their early bouts surrounding the structure of the new government was about whether it was to be a constitutional monarchy, as suggested by Miliukov, or a socialist republic supported by Kerensky.⁴ In either case, both men recognized that the Provisional Government stood on its own, and indeed, it stood virtually alone.

With regard to secondary sources, there are countless volumes which have illuminated the Russian Revolution from varying perspectives. The remainder of this paper could be nothing more than a list of respectable historians who have produced works on this subject. However, of particular value to the creation of this paper, Sheila Fitzpatrick's *The Russian Revolution*, and Richard Pipes' *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution* are equally indispensable secondary sources. In terms of the broader context of not only the Russian Revolution, but the evolution of the historiography of the topic, many of the articles cited in the bibliography have provided much needed clarity about the full nature of 1917.⁵ Of the online sources consulted, *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History* has held a volume of information which has proven extremely useful in obtaining materials and brief snapshots of events.

The Legitimacy Paradox

In some respects, the Provisional Government's legitimacy was stripped by the paradoxes of the revolution. By definition, a legitimate government is one which assumes authority: "conforming to the law or rules" or "(of a sovereign) having a title based on strict hereditary

⁴ Miliukov, *Political Memoirs*, p. 410.

⁵ Refer footnote no. 1 for a listing of critical sources as well.

right” or “v. to justify or make lawful.”⁶ For eight months of 1917 in Russia, the spark of liberal government flickered to life and then abruptly died. Nicholas II, the last of the Romanov rulers, had been forced by the pressure of World War I and the revolution to abdicate. Russia was suddenly without the singular authoritarian leadership which had ruled it for the previous three centuries. In the place of the monarchy, Russian political leaders were faced with the difficult choices that revolutionary political leaders must confront; how to build a new government in a country torn by political and civil strife, compounded by World War I. The creation of a state is difficult enough under favorable circumstances, but the formation of a new government in the crucible of the Russian revolutionary political climate was a monumental challenge. In revolutionary Russia, the new government would become known as the Provisional Government. In order to place meaning and significance on 1917 in perspective, the role of the Provisional Government must be addressed. Not only does it need to be analyzed in terms of legitimacy in the definitive sense, but also terms of how circumstances and events produced effects which weakened the Provisional Government’s position.

In democratic societies, a government (regardless of its provisional status) is not necessarily legitimate in its ascension without popular consent; in this sense, legitimacy is inextricably linked to popular sovereignty. In order for a government to be recognized as legitimate it must also be sovereign. If the Provisional Government was legitimate internationally and illegitimate domestically, how could it exist simultaneously as both? This begets the question; was the Provisional Government sovereign? If a government fails to meet the criteria of legitimacy and sovereignty, it is not a government. A government is created by either the natural and lawful succession of sovereign authority passing from one person or

⁶ *The Oxford American College Dictionary* (New York, NY: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2002), s.v. "Legitimate."

institution to another or it must have gained its authority from a declaration of sovereign authority supported by the will of those that a declaration claims to represent. Paul N. Miliukov, who played an important role in the Provisional Government as a party leader (Kadet) and orator, addressed this philosophical conundrum in his memoirs, "Was there any legal continuity between the old order which liquidated itself and the new order created on March 2, 1917? [That] a revolution occurred between them...implies a negative answer."⁷

The need for leadership was a critical priority, as seen in almost every perspective which has been related through memoir or historical analysis. The sense of the moment was that the revolution and the Russian people needed leadership. The *Izvestia* report No. 2 of February 28, 1917 recorded that, "At exactly midnight of February 27, the Executive Committee of the State Duma was finally organized..."⁸ The Temporary Committee was the first construct of leadership, having organized itself out of the remaining members of the former State Duma. As Kerensky notes, "...the meeting (of the Duma)...agreed to authorize the *Sen'oren convent* to appoint a Temporary Committee to restore order and make contact with the public organizations in Petrograd."⁹ The reality was that by the end of the same day, the members of the Temporary Committee were recognizing that they would have to assume more of a leadership role than any of the major leaders like Rodzianko, Kerensky, or Miliukov had expected. On 3 March, *Izvestiia* reported the roster of Provisional Government leaders which the Temporary Committee had chosen.¹⁰ In some respects, these leaders were equally eager, and equally reticent, to take on any greater role of authority; doing so was dangerous, not just politically, but perhaps personally. In particular, the former President of the Duma, M.V. Rodzianko, had shown divided sentiments on

⁷ Miliukov, *Political Memoirs*, pg. 389.

⁸ Browder and Kerensky, (eds.), *Documents*, Vol.1, No.23, pg. 47.

⁹ Browder and Kerensky, (eds.), *Documents*, Vol.1, 'Introduction', pg. 23.

¹⁰ Frank Golder, ed., *Documents of Russian History, 1914-1917* (New York: The Century Co., 1927), pp. 308-313.

how to proceed. Kerensky recalls in his documentation of the Provisional Government that, “Rodzianko reveals the dilemma of the majority of the Duma...I have made no revolution and do not intend to make one...there is no government...What shall I do? Step aside? Wash my hands? Leave Russia without a government? But after all, it is a question of Russia....We have obligations to the motherland.”¹¹ When viewed with other works, the feeling expressed by Rodzianko represented how many of the Provisional Governments leaders felt; trapped between a loyalty to the establishment, and duty or ambivalence to the Russian revolution. For Kerensky, and to a lesser degree Miliukov, the political maelstrom was where they operated best.

Overwhelmingly, the consensus was that despite the political and personal differences among the members of the Duma, the revolution left them with very little choice, “....There seemed but one alternative to anarchy...[that the Temporary Committee] ‘was compelled to take the responsibility for restoring national and public order,’...forming a new government.”¹² While the same held true in Miliukov’s perspective, Miliukov’s account reveals a critical idea. “By evening...the revolutionary character of the disturbances had also become clear; and the committee decided to take the next step: take power into its own hands.”¹³ The Temporary Committee took the power of government into its own hands, without particularly considering due process, or popular right to select their government, even though it clearly lacked a solid legitimacy. Worse still, as the historian Richard Pipes would note, “...They [the Provisional Government] thought of politics as legislating rather than administering...[they] issued countless laws intended to rectify the abuses of the old regime, but never created a set of new institutions

¹¹ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents*, Vol.1, ‘Introduction’, pg. 23.

¹² *Ibid.*, pg. 23.

¹³ Miliukov, *Political Memoirs*, pg. 392.

to replace those it had destroyed.”¹⁴ This was a sentiment shared by Miliukov, in particular, and one which would haunt the Provisional Government throughout its days.

In the Provisional Government’s defense, the workers’ riots and army mutinies might have appeared so pressing that no other possible solution could be envisioned. Order clearly had to be restored, but how was a more difficult question. There were initially four separate proposals brought before the “Unofficial Meeting of the Members of the State Duma, February 27 1917.”¹⁵ As the questions of how to form a new government for revolutionary Russia were discussed, “Rodzianko requested haste, for he who hesitates is lost, and suggested putting to a vote the 4 proposals moved: (1) to transfer power to the Council of Elders, (2) to form a Special Committee, (3) to proclaim the Duma a Constituent Assembly, (4) to elect a commission, which would be charged with the organization of the Government.”¹⁶ Miliukov and Kerensky’s accounts both identify the underlying concern. The members of the Temporary Committee recognized that they must prove the new government’s legitimacy. The leadership of the Provisional Government was operating on the premise that it had a legitimate mandate to govern beyond the authority of the old regime which had, by default, fallen to the Temporary Committee, “...The majority of the other factions did not accept this proposition and decided to organize an unofficial conference of members which through a private meeting, [and] would be clothed with the prestige of the Duma.”¹⁷ The representatives of some of the parties, Kerensky notes, wanted the full Duma to be seated, but true to the liberal ideas of the Provisional Government, majority ruled the day, and the Temporary Committee was formed and vested with the authoritative power of the Duma. However, it should be noted that whatever the presumption

¹⁴ Richard Pipes., *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, (New York, NY: Knopf, 1995)., pg. 92.

¹⁵ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents.*, Vol.1, No.22, pg. 45.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 47.

¹⁷ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents.*, Vol.1, ‘Introduction’, pg. 23.

of democratic ideals, they still felt necessary to associate the Temporary Committee with the “prestige of the Duma” in order to derive some degree of legitimacy from it.

For members of the Kadet party, like Miliukov, the Provisional Government’s legitimacy was not passed from the body of the Duma, but from the Imperial line of succession. Miliukov recalled that, “The members of the government were also named, but since Prince L’vov was named as premier in the bloc’s list, the formal creation of the government was postponed until his arrival in Petersburg...”¹⁸ Prince L’vov’s presence and patronage was required, if not only because his presence lent legitimacy to the Temporary Committee’s decrees and administrative decisions, but also because his presence gave the Temporary Committee slightly more liquid political capital than any of the rest of them possessed individually at the time. In essence, the State Duma ceased to exist, by consensus of its members, and divested its state authority into the Temporary Committee. As the Tsar abdicated to escape the Russian peoples’ wrath, the Duma surrendered to the revolution, leaving the Provisional Government as “the plenitude of executive and legislative power.”¹⁹ Even in Kerensky’s compilation of Provisional Government documents, there was no single document which transferred the legitimate authority to rule to the Provisional Government.²⁰ According to unofficial minutes from the February 27th 1917 meeting of the State Duma, (which were published on March 15, 1921 in *Voila Rossii* in Prague) there was nothing beyond the Duma’s resolution to form the Temporary Committee which transferred power.²¹ Furthermore, having L’vov, the cousin of Tsar Nicholas as Prime Minister, was a blow to the Provisional Government’s legitimacy, especially in the eyes of the revolutionary population. Including a member of the Romanov family in the new government did

¹⁸ Miliukov, *Political Memoirs*, pg. 392.

¹⁹ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents*, Vol.1, ‘Introduction’, pg. 25.

²⁰ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents*, Vol.1, No.22, pg. 45.

²¹ Unknown., *Viola Rossii* No. 153 (Prague), pg.4.

not lend legitimacy as Miliukov had hoped; rather, it further delegitimized the Provisional Government in not only the eyes of the newly formed Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, but also the Russian people.

These references illustrate the paradoxical question of how the new Provisional Government was attempting to legitimize its succession. The Temporary Committee struggled for legitimacy by association with institutions and bodies which were part of the Old regime. The leaders of the former Duma, like Rodzianko, Miliukov and Kerensky were now invested in the Temporary Committee. They, and the other members of the Provisional Government, formed by the Temporary Committee on March 2, clearly recognized that the legitimacy of the Provisional Government was even more subject to question than the Temporary Committee itself. Shelia Fitzpatrick aptly noted that, "The Provisional Government had no electoral mandate, deriving its authority from the now defunct Duma, the consent of the Army High Command, and informal agreements with public organizations...Given its fragility and lack of formal legitimacy...from the very beginning there were reasons to doubt the effectiveness of the transfer of power."²²

Outside of Russia, the question of the legitimacy of the Provisional Government was a question of Russia's necessity to the Allied and Associated powers' need for Russia's involvement for the prosecution of WWI. In the strictest sense, regardless of the political and philosophical desires of the Western powers to see Russia transition into a representative and liberal state, the recognition of the Provisional Government was a necessity. The value of the Russian troops on the Eastern front to the Allied-Associated war effort cannot be understated.

²² Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 3rd ed. (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pg. 46.

While international sources of support or recognition of the Provisional Government might seem irrelevant to the overall context of the Revolution, it is key to recognize that it *did* play some role in how the world viewed the Russian Revolution, and did lend a certain aura of credibility to the Provisional Government. However, the aura of legitimacy by association did not suffice for real legitimate government from within the Russian system. The *Izvestiia* No. 4 of March 1st reported,

The French and British Ambassadors have officially notified the President of the State Duma, M.V. Rodzianko, that the governments of France and England are entering into *de facto* relations with the Temporary Executive Committee of the State Duma, which expresses the True will of the people and is the only legal Provisional Government of Russia.²³

Kerensky and Browder's note below the heading belies the reality of the report,

"These...items...were rather exaggerated accounts of the early contacts between the Duma and the Allied representatives in Petrograd."²⁴ Even though the Provisional Government had achieved external recognition from Britain, France, and Italy by March 3rd, it was largely symbolic and never translated to a hard coalescence of legitimacy.

The support or consent of outside authority may have aided the Provisional Government's claims of legitimacy, but it certainly was not enough to convince the proletariat. The recognition of the Allied and Associated powers of the Provisional Government certainly lent credibility to it in bourgeois circles, and perhaps elsewhere in the upper Army ranks. But in so far as the proletariat was concerned, the support of bourgeois industrial-capitalists in the West was not the credibility that the Russian people wanted or needed to see. As Kerensky noted,

²³ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents*, Vol.1, No. 50, pg. 68.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pg. 68.

"Lenin also accused the Provisional Government of all the mortal sins of capitalism...[but] nothing about the basic social reforms – the agrarian and labor legislation it effected."²⁵

Perhaps if the Western powers had not been engaged so fully in the stalemate of WWI, they might have been able to lend more practical and direct support to the Provisional Government. But in terms of international recognition the history of the Provisional Government demonstrates that no amount of external support was sufficient to prop up the Provisional Government against the popular will of the Russian people.²⁶

The question of Russia's participation in WWI related directly to the Provisional Government's tenuous legitimacy for a number of reasons. The single greatest opponent to the Provisional Government's authority and legitimacy was the Soviet. This was particularly true if for no other reason than the bulk of the Army supported the Soviet. In terms of legitimacy, the support and loyalty of the armed forces of the state is one of the key elements, for obvious reasons. In the Provisional Government's case, that support was limited only to the officer corps and the upper echelon general staff. Kerensky, for his part, was keenly aware of the disparity.

There was general agreement...their strong political and moral authority within the army and the working class civilian populations would greatly increase the stability of the government. We felt it to be imperative to erase the false impression that the forces of Russian democracy were divided into two camps – 'revolutionary' and 'bourgeois'.²⁷

This disparity of support in the Army not only reflected the insubordinate nature of most of the enlisted troops, but it forced the Provisional Government to cooperate with the Soviet;

²⁵ Aleksandr Fyodorovich Kerensky, *Russia and History's Turning Point*, 1st ed. (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1965), pg. 223.

²⁶ "Note from the Russian Provisional Government and the British Reply Respecting the Allied War Aims," *The American Journal of International Law*, Supplement, 11, no. 4 (October 1917): pg. #, accessed September 1, 2012, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2212576>.

²⁷ A.F. Kerensky, *Russia and History's Turning Point*, pg. 231.

an arrangement that a sovereign and legitimate government would not have to accept. The dual power arrangement between the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies and the Provisional Government was utterly crippling.

Despite the Provisional Government's assumption of power, the dual power arrangement was tenuous at best, and at worst little more than lip service from the Soviet. Kerensky sums up the dual power arrangement,

...the Soviet assumed the role of representative of the democracy, i.e. the masses. It would guard the gains of the revolution from the real or suspected enemies inside and outside the government which was in the process of formation...the Soviet also moved to restore order in the capital, establish discipline among the rebellious troops, and relieve the food shortage.²⁸

In large part, this power sharing was a necessary evil for both the Provisional Government and the Soviet. For a number of reasons, the Provisional Government would always be weaker. The loyalty of the Army was divided between those who swore allegiance to the Provisional Government, and those who supported the Soviets. For its part, the Soviet had made its role in the new regime clear with Order No. 1, "Their attitude...was demonstrated in one of the first resolutions of the Executive Committee, which expressed readiness to support the new government only, 'insofar as it does not encroach on the rights of the workers won by the Revolution.'²⁹ This placed not only the Army at odds with itself, but the Provisional Government and the Soviet at loggerheads.

Just as Kerensky illustrated that there was the division within the between the Provisional Government under the title "Committee of the State Duma" and the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, so too there was a division within the Army. Like most of the Russian

²⁸ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents*, Vol.1, 'Introduction', pg. 23.

²⁹ A.F. Kerensky, *Russia and History's Turning Point*, pg. 231.

civilian population, the Army divided along class lines. The officer ranks swore fealty to the Provisional Government, while their enlisted proletarian subordinates supported the Soviet. Even so, by August, when General Kornilov sought to overthrow the Provisional Government, the loyalty of the officer corps came into question. The division was clear, and not unexpected, when placed in the context of the revolution as a whole. Officer and enlisted found themselves at odds over not only their political loyalties but their loyalty to the revolution and proletariat, or to the Provisional Government. Regardless, the implications for the Provisional Government were clear. Legitimacy was never really a question in anyone's mind besides the members of the Provisional Government. As Sheila Fitzpatrick relates in her summary of the Russian revolution, the reality emerging from this division was matter-of-fact and indisputable:

The Provisional Government does not possess any real power; and its directives are carried out only to the extent that it is permitted by the Soviet which enjoys all the essential elements of real power, since the troops, the railroads, the post and telegraph are all in its hands. One can say flatly that the Provisional Government exists only so long as it is permitted by the Soviet.³⁰

It was unsurprising that the Soviet held the bulk of the political power. The proletariat certainly outnumbered those who supported the Provisional Government, as the quote before demonstrates. The dual power arrangement which arose because of the division, not only in the Army, but in the population as well, was partially the result of circumstance. The Soviets were painfully aware that the Officers and Army High Command (the Stavka) staff were going to pledge loyalty to the Provisional Government, because despite the revolutionary upheaval, the Provisional Government represented the remaining authority of the Romanovs. Equally, the bourgeois and old regime nobility and Russia's economic sectors would support the liberal aims of the Provisional Government. In the midst of the revolution, what little support the Provisional

³⁰ Allan K. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), pg. 260.

Government had from the Russian population would quickly wane, largely because of these bourgeois and monarchial leanings. Within the first two months, Miliukov, as a supporter of a constitutional monarchy, would fall victim to the proletariat's unwillingness to support the Provisional Government. As Foreign Minister, Miliukov had "implied a continued interest in extending Russian control over Constantinople and the Straits...before public outcry and renewed street demonstrations forced him to resign."³¹

Politics, the saying goes, makes for strange bedfellows. The Provisional Government certainly personified that sentiment well. By Miliukov's count of the parties in his memoirs, there were a dozen distinct political parties involved in the Provisional Government.³² Some, like the Party of People's Freedom (also known as the Constitutional Democratic Party, or Kadets) the Social Democrats, (SD) and the Trudoviks were stronger than others. The relationship between the Provisional Government as a convened body representative of those parties and the people was the critical element. The divisiveness of party politics would eventually force the Kadets to leave the Provisional Government, depriving it of the desperately needed consensus within, as well as from without. The sheer number of parties made it a vast challenge for legislation to move forward, and when legislation did move forward it often did so over the objections of some of the weaker parties. During the debates on land and agrarian reform there existed numerous examples of exactly the kind of discord which was sown by the array of political opinions contained in the Provisional Government.³³ The number of resolutions either by the parties of the Provisional Government, or the Soviets, demonstrated the discontinuity of policy toward the Russian proletariat. On a topic as important as agrarian and land reforms, consensus was at a premium, yet it remained elusive.

³¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, pg. 48.

³² Miliukov, *Political Memoirs.*, pg. 439.

³³ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents*, Vol.2, No. 470, pgs. 523-614.

The intricacies of the political debates which went on in the Provisional Government would require more exhaustive explanation than there is space for here. Let it suffice to say that the factionalized nature of the Provisional Government also hampered its quest for legitimacy. While the Petrograd Soviet and the other Soviets were largely united in their statement and revolutionary goals, the Provisional Government was by its own democratic nature considerably more divested of consensus. The argument may be put forward, and perhaps rightfully so, that the Provisional Government was indeed provisional, and temporary. It was intended to serve the function of briefly maintaining the state institutions while the Constituent Assembly could be called and popular elections held. However, circumstances prevented that sequence of events from playing out. Of relevance to the issue of the Provisional Government's legitimacy was the decision to postpone the convening of the Constituent Assembly until after the elections of 12 November.³⁴ There is little disagreement among sources that the decision to postpone the calling of the Constituent Assembly represents one of the most disastrous mistakes that the Provisional Government made. At a time when the Provisional Government had little enough political capital to spend, this decision cost it dearly. Not only did it functionally undermine the Provisional Government's legitimacy in a legal sense, but, more critically, it cost them valuable popular support among liberals and socialists.

When viewed in conjunction with the dual power arrangement, the issue of who was to represent the head of the new government represented a pressing problem. Lenin was a strong leader for the Bolsheviks. In the most simple of terms, the Provisional Government could not even agree on a leader, much less install one. This further undermined their claims of legitimacy. Prince L'vov had announced his "...rejection of the throne until and unless it was

³⁴ James Von Geldern and Lewis Siegelbaum, "Seventeen Moments in Soviet History," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, The Constituent Assembly, accessed September 2, 2012, <http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php>.

offered to him by the people through the forthcoming Constituent Assembly," leaving even what remained of the Romanov's authority beyond reach.³⁵ Miliukov considered that, "Prince L'vov did Russia a bad service..."³⁶ But Miliukov was not the only one who recognized that Prince L'vov was ill prepared and ill-suited to the job of leading the Provisional Government. However, Miliukov also recognized that the circumstances of the Revolution had left them with few better options. Kerensky alluded to much the same kind of conclusion, albeit in more conciliatory terms.³⁷ For all the shortcomings Miliukov indicted Kerensky of, Kerensky was well aware that the balance of power in the Provisional Government hinged around the perceptions of the party members. Miliukov argued that associating the Provisional Government with the monarchy was the only certain means to ensure the government's survival long enough to vest itself in legitimacy through the Constituent Assembly, "...in order to strengthen the new order, a strong governmental authority was needed and that it can be strong only when it relies on the symbol of authority to which the masses are accustomed. The monarchy serves as just such a symbol. The Provisional Government, by itself, without the support of this symbol, will simply not survive until the opening of the Constituent Assembly."³⁸ The Provisional Government failed to establish the kind of leadership that the Bolsheviks had via Lenin, and in so doing, removed one more claim to legitimacy.

The intense rivalries and hot debates over policy which enveloped the Provisional Government created a slow process of legislation. Even when legislation was proposed and voted upon, the Provisional Government often lacked the necessary force to place any legislation into effect. As a result, much of the reforms demanded of the Provisional Government by

³⁵ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents*, Vol.1, 'Introduction' pg. 25.

³⁶ Miliukov, *Political Memoirs*, pg. 419.

³⁷ A.F. Kerensky, *Russia and History's Turning Point*, pg. 228.

³⁸ Miliukov, *Political Memoirs*, pg. 411.

society were reduced to the Government pleading for cooperation. But the harsh demands of the revolution required both the Soviet and the Provisional Government to cooperate. The critical food supply for the Army and civilian population required a united front, because the people were one political power that the Provisional Government and the Soviet could not do without. One of the first tenuous steps of the Provisional Government had been to appeal to the Soviet, "...for Cooperation in Supplying the Population and the Army with Food."³⁹ Even here, the Provisional Government was relegated to pleas, "Citizens of Russia – agriculturalist, landowners, merchants, railroad employees, and workers – help our native land. The army and the [civilian] population must be fed..."⁴⁰ Clearly, the Provisional Government had issues far beyond its own legitimacy with which to contend.

The conflict within the Provisional Government was not limited to the Army, land reform, food supply, or relations with the Soviet. In fact, great debate was heard over the basic form of the new government. The Provisional Government, such as it was, was politically surrounded. The legitimacy of the Tsar or the Imperial crown, and the legislative authority of the Duma had evaporated. In effect, all previous entities and institutions had dissolved and as Rodzianko put it, "faded away."⁴¹

While the complications of creating the new government and enacting reforms absorbed the Provisional Government, the rifts between government and governed grew. It was not that the leadership of the Provisional Government had consciously avoided the major threats to its legitimacy; it simply pretended that they never existed. The new government labored as if its legitimacy was secured by its investiture from the Duma and the popular revolution. But some

³⁹ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents*, Vol. I, No. 52, pg. 69.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pg. 70.

⁴¹ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents*, Vol. I, No. 118, pg. 138.

of the Provisional Government leadership knew better, "...the State Duma would have been the bearer of the Supreme Power and the organ before whom the Provisional Government would have been responsible. This was the project of the President of the State Duma. But this project was resolutely opposed, mainly by the members of the Kadet Party, followed naturally by the whole left wing of the State Duma..."⁴² Either side, whether republic or constitutional monarchy, would have been preferable over the infighting and fractionalization within the Provisional Government.

Failures of the Provisional Government; Beyond Legitimacy

When every circumstance and decision made by the members of the Provisional Government is analyzed, none of them become as damning as their failure to secure a legitimate referendum of its authority. Though economic, social, land, and political policy blunders certainly contributed to the Provisional Government's destruction, careful examination of those events and decisions were all functionally administrative, rather than about its political life or death. Ironically, when the Temporary Committee had formed on February midnight the 27th, it had done so with the premise that,

[Just] as soon as the danger is passed and a firm peace established, we will begin preparations for the Constituent Assembly on the basis of direct, equal, secret, and universal suffrage. The freely elected representatives of the people will decide who better reflects Russian public opinion, we or our adversaries.⁴³

This statement revealed a telltale truth; that even as early as March 2nd, Miliukov had recognized that the Provisional Government had a very weak grip on its legitimacy. But the Provisional Government failed to call the Constituent Assembly. The question of when the Constituent Assembly would be called was constantly delayed. First the Assembly was delayed until after

⁴² Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents*, Vol.1, No. 119, pg. 139.

⁴³ Miliukov, *Political Memoirs*, pg. 407.

November of 1917. Absent that key element alone, perhaps the Provisional Government might have survived. But the Provisional Government continued to make critical missteps which eroded its credibility: The Provisional Government chose to arrest members of the 'Old Regime', enacted legislation that was perceived as bourgeois economic policy, and dodged effective land reform by creating subsidiary commissions rather than directly administering the demands of the proletariat.⁴⁴

In a sense, the arrest of members of the Old Regime was a wholesale attempt by the new government to engender support from the proletariat. However, it relied on the presupposition that the Provisional Government was indeed anointed by the proletariat with the mantle of revolutionary legitimacy. By indicting the Old Regime for the barest gain of political capital, the leaders of the Provisional Government undermined their own claims of legitimacy. The leadership simply sought to engage a policy which would appease the revolutionary demands of the populace, and they failed to choose carefully which sacrificial lamb was led to the slaughter. In so doing they again removed a means to establish their legitimacy. At every turn, the leaders of the Provisional Government, caught in the crucible of revolution, unwittingly cast out opportunities to ensure its survival. In so far as the revolution itself was the bearer of the Provisional Government's authority, Kerensky went so far as to proclaim, "...the Provisional Government carried out its entire legislative program with the approval of the whole country and thus laid a firm foundation for Russia's transformation into an advanced state."⁴⁵ Kerensky's sentiment illustrated the degree of myopia some of the leaders of the government were viewing the revolution under.

⁴⁴ Browder and Kerensky (eds.), *Documents*, Vol. I, No. 24, pg. 47.

⁴⁵ A.F. Kerensky, *Russia and History's Turning Point*, pg. 222.

By August, the leadership of the Provisional Government knew that it was suffering severely in the court of public opinion. Kerensky notes, "...we in the government were acutely aware of the need to establish closer links with all sections of the population...without them, we were extremely vulnerable to demagogic pressures..."⁴⁶ But these inroads were difficult, even after the State Conference in Moscow. Kerensky was often naïve in his perceptions of the public, especially at the height of his power in the Provisional Government, before the Kornilov Affair. In his later recollections of the Provisional Government, Kerensky stated, "In the Soviets...Bolshevik influence had virtually disappeared following the July uprising...having served their purpose during the collapse of the monarchy, were tending to break up."⁴⁷ It was this misperception and others like it, which prevented Kerensky from seeing that the breakup of the Soviets was only hardening the proletarian resolve against the Provisional Government. The debate between Miliukov and Kerensky was a heated one. Miliukov expressed in his memoirs that Kerensky allowed his personal ambitions to get the better of him. "Apparently, he had already been propagandized – and by no means in the ideological sense..."⁴⁸ Such debates were the kind of philosophical deadlock which hamstrung the Provisional Government within its own body of leaders.

It would be egregious not to acknowledge the financial and economic factors which also played a significant role in the failure of the Provisional Government. Indeed, the very nature of the Russian revolution was based on economic hardship and financial disparity. However, this subject alone could fill several texts.⁴⁹ Needless to say, governments require money to operate and to operate the institutions which are established to perform the functions required by the

⁴⁶ Ibid. pg. 325.

⁴⁷ A.F. Kerensky, *Russia and History's Turning Point*, pg. 324.

⁴⁸ Miliukov, *Political Memoirs*, pg. 411.

⁴⁹ Kerensky and Browder (eds.), *Documents*, Vol.2 Part III, pgs. 479-770

legislative body. When decisions about economic and financial issues needed to be made, the Provisional Government again became caught in the battle between revolution and administration. The competing interests within the Provisional Government forced a virtual deadlock of ideologies. Miliukov noted that plans were not action, and action was what the Provisional Government needed, "Plans for organizing the national economy and measures for controlling production were to be worked out, 'without delay' by the Economic Council and the Economic Committee. There were many plans, but few possibilities after what had already been tried."⁵⁰ One editorial in *Russkiiia Vedomosti* from September highlights the sentiment surrounding the Provisional Government's economic and social failures. Indeed, the first sentences were characteristic of the Provisional Government's popularity, or its lack thereof:

There is no government in Russia, no law, no political actions; instead, an abundance of political words. Countless congresses and conferences...and speeches made at each of them...The man on the street, who lives under the weight of economic factors of everyday life and who looks daily to a change for better or worse, on opening the paper every day finds the same torrent of speeches. He finally succumbs to the hypnosis of political words and with them forgets about the approaching threat of economic facts...the effect of economics on life is making itself felt ever more severely and painfully.⁵¹

Regardless the Provisional Government's plans, the lack of forceful and decisive legislation which made real changes for the proletariat further undermined what little legitimacy the government possessed. It was as if the formation of a Committee or Council was the Provisional Government's answer to the people's problems. The Committees and Councils simply did not satisfy the demands of the revolution, or the Russian people. Even though the Provisional Government established the Land Committees in March, land reform was one area that the vast majority of the Russian population did not want to stall. The delay between the formation of the Provisional Government in late February, and the middle of March, combined

⁵⁰ Ibid., pg. 474.

⁵¹ Browder and Kerensky (eds), *Documents*, Vol. 2, No. 670, pg. 769.

with the sentiment that the Provisional Government too often represented bourgeois interests in its leadership was deadly to the Provisional Government's credibility with the people.

Conclusions

The Provisional Government was a product of the revolution. It did not initially succumb to the revolution, rather the revolution had given the Provisional Government a window to succeed. When it did not, like the Romanovs before it, the revolution removed it. While Russia marched toward proletarian ideals of equality and progress, the Provisional Government grasped for philosophical ideals of liberty. At some level, the reality of 1917 was that revolution demanded change, and the change that the Provisional Government promised it failed to deliver. When the Russian people were ragged, hungry, and tired of war, the idea of liberal government did not put clothes on their backs, food in their bellies nor bring their soldiers home.

In no uncertain terms, the Provisional Government was devoured by its own lack of legitimate authority to rule. In almost every area of consequence, whether it was the Army, land reform, or fiscal responsibility, the Provisional Government never really accepted the responsibility of governing. Instead, its leaders became occupied with legislating rather than the dirty business of administering public affairs. Part of the reason for the Provisional Government's unwillingness to administrate public affairs and policy might have been a simple product of scale. The men in charge of the Provisional Government, though educated and experienced in politics and principle, mistook that knowledge as a mandate to govern, neglecting the realistic demands of the act of governing. That is to say, there is a vast difference between understanding the philosophies of government, and making a complex liberal government actually function.

Whatever the complications and contextual disagreements, the Russian Provisional Government of 1917 was one of the most important factors in the meaning of 1917. That it failed because it lacked legitimacy where it counted most only underscores its importance. The Provisional Government had been formed on a thin link to old regime authority which, in due course, it stripped from itself. The government had formed absent the one quality which defines the authority of government, and its leaders ignored the imperative to obtain a lawful legislative succession. Miliukov, in his memoirs reflected, "We consciously thrust aside all these sources of legitimate succession for our government. Only one answer remained – the clearest and most convincing one. I answered: 'We were chosen by the Russian Revolution!'"⁵² Revolution or no revolution, Miliukov had miscalculated the support for the Provisional Government by the population.

Looking objectively at the steps of the Provisional Government, there were several missed opportunities to obtain legitimacy, or at the very least, some semblance of it. Miliukov in particular had alluded to some of those, even though they faced bitter opposition.⁵³ Had the Provisional Government acted more quickly to convene the Constituent Assembly, its legitimacy might have been secured. The fear on the part of the leadership of the Provisional Government that the calling of a Constituent Assembly would rob them of their perceived political authority helped ensure that no other outcome could have occurred. Although Miliukov's suggestion to align the Provisional Government with the remnants of the monarchy was detested, it would also have produced some degree of legitimacy. Even if the Temporary Committee had chosen not to arrest fellow members of the Duma, they would have again remitted some of that institution's legitimacy to themselves. With respect to the Soviet, the leadership of the Provisional

⁵² Miliukov, *Political Memoirs*, pg. 406.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pg. 407.

Government might have chosen to resist the dual power arrangement with the Soviet, at least more than it did. It is easy to suggest that this was possible, but the evidence would also suggest that it would have been difficult. Yet, as Fitzpatrick noted, the Soviet had consciously chosen to show, "deference to the bourgeoisie revolution..."⁵⁴ Even still, at the time the Soviet hardly seemed fully in control of its own elements. The loyalty that the proletariat enlisted in the Army gave the Soviet, above all, would have prevented the Provisional Government from distancing itself from the dual power agreement.

Finally, there is the inevitable question which historians must ultimately confront. That is, so what? What does 1917, the Russian revolution, and the Provisional Government mean, here and now? If nothing else, the tale of the Provisional Government is a cautionary one. It has profound significance to emerging revolutionary governments, whether they are liberal or not. This is especially true of those which have arisen from the Arab Spring. There are critical lessons to be taken from the errors of the Provisional Government, not the least of which might be that all governments need legitimacy secured by a mandate of the people. Further, these new governments should be careful not to strip that legitimacy away. While the significance of 1917 has been interpreted in different ways depending on the perspective the revolution has been viewed from, the meaning of 1917 in the context of the Provisional Government is simple. Revolutions past and present are radical and violent change, and the government which does not firmly root itself in the will of the people cannot weather the revolutionary storm.

⁵⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, pg. 47.

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A Reflective Essay:

“The Russian Provisional Government and 1917: The Legitimacy Paradox”

In truth, writing this essay proved more difficult than writing the paper. It is not easy for me to qualify or quantify something which is – as I think history is to those of us who study it – a labor of love and reverence. For me, writing this paper was a powerful experience; powerful because it brought a new depth of understanding of the incredible responsibility that historians take on when they write about history, however narrow or expansive the scope. In no uncertain terms, this paper represents not only a great deal of research and analysis, but a personal revelation about the nature of the historian’s discipline. That is to say, throughout my academic career, professors have always communicated the depth of the responsibility and duty of historians. I had simply never fully understood it; I heard it in each lecture and read it in their comments in the margins of papers, but it took this paper to fully realize what that responsibility meant.

Writing this paper was as much a test of historical research ability as it was a test of writing and discipline. For all its challenges, it proved to be its own greatest reward. This paper would simply not have been possible without the wonderful guidance and direction of Professor Dennison, to whom I owe the deepest thanks. I also owe a great deal of thanks to the online links and resource guides provided by Mr. Kevin Keating, and the Consortium Library staff. However, this paper would have been impossible without the Inter-Library Loan office, which enabled me to obtain copies of *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents* by Browder and Kerensky. As a single source, *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents* represented one of the best sources of compiled primary evidence for this paper. Browder’s volumes, and several additional writings by Alexander Kerensky and Paul Miliukov

about the Provisional Government and their respective roles during 1917, quickly became the pillars of the paper.

When this paper began, aside from my own limited experience studying Russian history, one of the looming challenges was finding primary source material that was relevant, accessible, and translated. More to the point, I needed to hone the ability to distinguish between primary source material that was simply adequate, and the sources which were truly exceptional. Much of the early stages of this paper developed out of reading numerous secondary source materials. Many of the journal articles and books on the historiography of the Russian Revolution in general, which Professor Dennison recommended as readings proved invaluable. Based on several of the books in Professor Dennison's personal library, as well as the links provided by Mr. Keating's online references to Russian history I was able to fill in most of the general blanks. Links Mr. Keating and Professor Dennison provided, like James Von Geldern and Lewis Siegelbaum's website, "Seventeen Moments in Soviet History" helped codify and narrow my search. Further, and in no small part, because of the course lecture provided by Mr. Keating, I was also able to consult several of the volumes of Prokhorov's *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, something which would often be overlooked by students like me, on the lower shelves next to the reference desk.

The modern student is particularly blessed by the benefits of technology. Writing this paper would have been a far more laborious process without the resources available online via the Consortium Library. I cannot estimate the value of the library's partnerships with search databases which provided countless references in historical and political journals. With the ability to use the Consortium Library's resources to the best of my knowledge, I was initially able to cast a broad net for source material and gradually narrow its scope in on the Provisional

Government. My early castings for sources were largely based on the sifted and well organized sources on Mr. Keating's Russian/USSR online reference page. With each source I found, either online, or in texts and journals, successive sources appeared and I attempted to network them together; a few sources derived from this book, or that journal article. To be honest, I cannot say I remember exactly how or when I found the first reference to Browder and Kerensky's *The Russian Provisional Government, 1917: Documents*. However, it was mentioned in many of the other works by authors who had published after the mid-1960s. From its use by other respected historians, it certainly warranted more investigation as a seminal set of primary documents. Much to my initial dismay, a search of the Consortium Library's collection catalog turned up empty. Several copies were available by Inter-Library Loan, and after a bit more investigation to ensure that these books were worth shipping up, I placed a request. In less than a week I had all three volumes in hand, and within moments of cracking the first volume's cover, I knew I had one of the best primary sources I could have found (short of a Moscow archive, I am sure).

In sum, the process of writing this paper proved to have been both a challenge and a reward. It took countless hours of slow gathering, culling, organizing, writing, and re-writing 'till the wee hours of the morning, not to mention the gallons of caffeinated beverages. But it has demonstrated to me a truism of historical research: historical research is not only largely dependent on the availability and pertinence of sources. Research is equally dependent on the resources available to a writer – like Inter-Library Loan, and research guides by expert reference staff – and the writer's willingness to utilize the guidance of academic mentors. Done right, the research process is like music, a sort of harmony in motion between research, writer, and mentors.